

## The Danger of Unrestricted Mexican Immigration

By JAY S. STOWELL

*Editorial at The Near Side of the Mexican Question and Great Waves of Social Questions*

WHILE certain interests have pleaded for the United States to invade Mexico, that country has unintentionally accomplished an invasion of the United States which is bound to have its effect on our future. The number of Mexicans coming into this country has steadily increased since the overthrow of the Diaz Government in Mexico in 1911, followed by the World War, the consequent demand for labor in this country and our quota law curtailing European immigration. It is difficult to estimate how large the influx has been because, though some Mexicans come to us as recognized immigrants through the regular ports of entry, many more were brought in as contract laborers under an arrangement whereby the contract labor clause, the head tax and the literacy test provided in the immigration law were temporarily suspended, while thousands more simply slipped across the line without the least formality. A recent estimate by a Mexican Consul of a group of 6,000 Mexicans seeking employment was that 5,000 of them were in the United States illegally. Some believe that that proportion is fairly typical.

During and after the war workers were needed everywhere; Mexicans were welcomed and few questions were asked. Today the situation is somewhat different. Although it is still possible for Mexicans to cross the line at will, the path of new immigrants in this country is no longer easy unless they carry proper credentials. Labor agencies are more insistent on this point than ever before and immigration inspectors are more active. Attempts to defeat the law have led to stronger measures. At times ranchers have kept guards posted so that, at the approach of an immigration inspector, a gun might be fired and Mexican laborers illegally in this country might seek cover until the danger had passed. More recently an informal understanding

has been reached with representatives of the Bureau of Investigation providing for the payment by certain Mexicans of the head tax by installments. When payment is completed, the Mexicans involved cross the line into Mexico and then in passport in Mexico as a legal immigrant.

The number of Mexicans in this country is variously estimated at from 1,000,000 to 2,000,000 and even higher; 1,500,000 is probably a conservative estimate based on actual information. They have as thoroughly incorporated themselves into the life of Texas, Arizona and California that their sudden withdrawal would paralyze the industrial and economic life of those areas. To a smaller extent that is true of New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas in regard to specialized industries in other States.

The Mexican raises Bermuda onions by the thousands of bushels in Texas; he picks cotton, not only in Texas, but in Mississippi, Arkansas and Tennessee, where he has in some communities replaced negro labor for that purpose. The growers of the Great Western Sugar Company alone employ about 2,000 Mexicans to grow 191,000 acres of beets. The amazing developments in the Salt River and Gila River valleys of Arizona are Mexican products. In California the Mexican has made possible the development of the Imperial Valley, with its manifold productions. He dominates the Mesa bean empire; he picks walnuts; he raises citrus fruit; he is particularly skilled in horticultural work, and, in fact, has made himself indispensable to Southern California. In Pittsburgh, Pa., and a dozen other places he helps make steel, and in Alaska he runs salmon. There are thousands of Mexicans at work in Chicago. At least 5,000 are employed in the beet fields of the North Platte Valley of Nebraska. Another substantial colony is engaged in similar work in the Red River Valley of North Dakota, and still another colony continues around

the plants of the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company of Pueblo, Joliet, Ill., has 1,000 Mexicans and Aurora, 1,000. The Columbia Sugar Company of Michigan employs 600 Mexican families. Toledo has a Mexican population of 2,500, and Newark, N. J., of 2,000. The places just mentioned are but typical of many more.

#### MEXICANS ON RAILROADS

The Mexican has made an important place for himself in the railroads of the country. Thousands are employed by the Atchafalaya, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad on all its lines, and other thousands on the Rock Island. From information available we estimate nearly 16,000 Mexicans on these two systems alone. The Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad reports 3,000; the Great Northern Railroad from 500 to 1,000 (varying with the season); the Southern Pacific Lines, 4,216 in Texas and Louisiana alone; the Northern Pacific several hundred; and the Pennsylvania Lines 1,200 regular Mexican employes and several hundred additional seasonal workers.

In spite of the popular impression which often points to the contrary, the Mexican is a good worker, but that does not mean a perfect worker. He is sensitive, and sometimes he fails to appear next day if his foreman has been unduly abusive. He has no watch and may be late for work. He is often undernourished and poorly housed, and he has had little training in thrift.

Probably no single group in the United States is collecting more seriously from the evils of seasonal employment than is the Mexican. The beet sugar industry, in which so many of them are employed, is typical. Technically, the beet season begins in the early Spring and the beet harvest is not completed until well into November. Actually the working period is very limited, although it extends over six or seven months, from May to November. The hand work in the beet fields is done by contract, and the price per acre in 1938 in Colorado, which is the most important sugar-beet producing State, ranged from \$21 to \$24. One Mexican can usually care for about ten acres. During the slack periods the Mexican is free to seek other work if he can find it, but he must be on hand to care for the beets when his help is needed. From the

last of November till the next May he is likely to be unemployed.

The living conditions growing out of this system of seasonal employment have at times been very bad, although employers are coming to see that crude, unsanitary shacks are in the long run a poor business investment as well as a social menace. A study made in 1925 by the National Child Labor Committee of 310 families on the western slope of Colorado showed that the children were retarded in every way and that boys and girls of school age were employed at arduous labor. It has been the custom in the beet country to recruit workers each Spring from border towns or from Spanish-American groups in New Mexico. There is a growing conviction, however, that such a labor turnover in poor economy, and definite efforts are being made to care for the workers during the Winter so that they will be on hand for the next crop.

In California there is a marked tendency for agricultural workers to congregate in Los Angeles during the "off" seasons. San Antonio and El Paso are favorite milping centres in Texas. Many, of course, go to Mexico for a limited period and return with the arrival of Spring. If they do not remain longer than six months in Mexico they are treated as visitors, and may return to the United States without legal difficulty.

#### STAGGERING TENDENCY

Although the Mexican has moved about a great deal since coming to the United States, he shows a marked tendency toward stabilization. A striking illustration is to be found in Los Angeles, probably the greatest single Mexican centre in the country. Here, during the past five or six years, as soon as his economic status permitted, the Mexican has been deserting the downtown Plaza district for the suburbs, where tens of thousands of Mexicans are now living in their own little homes hedged in with colorful flower gardens. Their children attend modern public schools, and they and their children's children will color California history for generations to come.

Legally the Mexican is a "white" man; yet a few communities insist that his chil-

den shall be enrolled in the colored schools, and in cases where there is no such school separate Mexican schools are sometimes maintained.

Racial prejudice takes many forms. Not many months ago a capable young man of Mexican parentage walked into the office of a Mexican Consul in Texas and asked if he could renounce his United States citizenship and gain a Mexican status. He had been born in Texas, had grown up in the public schools of the State and had served with the Army overseas. Recently he was drawn on a jury panel and then rejected by one of the lawyers in the case involved because of his Mexican extraction. "I was good enough to fight," said he, "but I am insulted when drawn on a jury."

Probably most friction in Texas is produced by labor contracts. Many cases of dishonest dealing with Mexicans, particularly on the part of cotton growers, have created a scandalous situation. An organization, known as La Comision Henequena, has come into existence for the purpose of assisting Mexican laborers to obtain satisfaction from their employers. One trick played by employers is to get the Mexican deported just as the crop which he has raised and in which he is supposed to share comes to harvest. In all dealings the American, of course, has the advantage, and his contracts are full of loopholes which can be used for his advantage. Nothing is of greater urgency than fair business dealings with the Mexican. At present he is exploited by employers and by ruthless agents who persuade him to buy useless articles at exorbitant prices. There are, however, some large concerns that have already gained a reputation for honesty with Mexicans.

#### FORMER MEXICAN TERRITORY

Mexican immigration to the United States cannot be fully understood unless we remember that Mexicans are coming to a territory which once belonged to Mexico and which is already populated by perhaps nearly half a million descendants of former Mexicans. When we took New Mexico and other territories of our Southwest from Mexico, according to the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848), we granted citizenship to the settlers in the territory. Their descendants today are American citi-

zens in every sense of the word and eligible to the highest offices in the land, although many of them have little or no knowledge of English. In fact, one of the regular appropriations of the New Mexico Legislature for years has been for interpreters so that its own members might follow the proceedings.

In spite of the fact that Mexico is our next-door neighbor of foreign tongue and of a social heritage somewhat different from our own, we are joined to her along a border of 1,800 miles. The Rio Grande River, which can be waded at certain seasons of the year, is our most formidable barrier. At other points not so much as a wire fence separates the two countries. Thousands of Americans go across the line into Mexico each day for business and other purposes, and thousands of Mexicans come into the United States regularly to buy goods, to transact other business or to attend school. We send \$1,000,000 worth of goods into Mexico each day and we receive other products in return. In a multitude of ways the life of Mexico and the United States is inextricably interwoven.

#### THE MEXICAN QUOTA ISSUE

Anxiety has been caused by the increased Mexican immigration, and Secretary Davis of the Department of Labor has declared himself in favor of a Mexican quota. Many others have come to the same conclusion. At the time this article was written a bill, sponsored by Representative Box of Texas, and extending the quota provisions to immigrants from Mexico, was being considered by Congress. On the other hand, chambers of commerce along the border are pleading for the abolition of the head tax and visa fee, so that immigration may be stimulated and more help may be available for cotton picking. At present Mexican immigration is not limited by a quota, but there are other natural checks. The total of Mexican immigrants to the country fell from 69,319 in 1924 to 42,878 in 1925. The increased head tax, in the form of a \$10 visa fee, is said to have been largely responsible, although other causes have been operating. At present an adult Mexican immigrant must pay a total of \$18 to cross the line—\$10 for an American consular visa and \$8 as head tax. Chil-

den under 16 years of age are exempted from the head tax, but are subject to the visa fee. These charges automatically cut off a large portion of the Mexican immigration stream. There is also in Mexico a movement to discourage emigration to the United States. The increased activity of immigration inspectors tends likewise to reduce the number of illegal entrants.

The steady improvement of conditions in Mexico, including the establishment of rural schools, is also doing much to make the Mexican contented at home. Although he now has friends and relatives in the United States, he does not come here because he loves this country, but rather to better his economic condition and to secure educational advantages for his children.

#### MEXICAN CITIZENSHIP PROBLEMS

The Mexican rarely becomes a naturalized American citizen. There are at least two reasons for this. One is that the homeland is never far away; the other that he is not sure whether he would be fairly treated if he threw his lot permanently with this country. He sees too much injustice meted out to his people. Last year in our

southern district alone in Texas twenty-two young men, born and educated in the United States, walked into the Mexican Consulate at El Paso and declared themselves citizens of Mexico. These young men had just reached 21 years of age. They had never lived in Mexico, but they were so doubtful that they would receive just treatment in the United States that they did not have faith enough to imagine them to become citizens of the United States, but preferred to risk the future as Mexicans.

The situation along our Mexican border is complex and it will never be anything else. It demands mutual understanding and a sense of fair play. Differences in language is a handicap to fraternity. We need desperately a genuinely bilingual border. Any prospect in teaching Spanish to citizens of the United States and teaching English to Mexicans is a real social gain. The Mexican is here to stay, and his children's children will be with us as long as the United States is a country. A man may desert his wife and abandon his children, but the United States can never run away from Mexico. If we will, we shall find Mexico worthy of better understanding and abiding friendship.

## Other Aspects of the Problem

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IT was two decades ago, in a steaming jungle of the Vera Cruz hinterland. British mills were in the neighborhood and most of their guests understood English. An American sociologist, seeing a peon with a bunch of deliciously ripe bananas, noted the cost of a dozen. There was haggling back and forth in the good old Mexican style, and the price was finally fixed at 10 centavos, about 5 American cents. Imagine the sociologist's surprise when he was handed the entire banana bunch. The Mexican then shouted to some companions squatted in the shade of a nearby niche: "I shared this Oringo out of five (ten) centavos for the bunch." His heart was significant. He had not only gained nearly a third of a day's wages

through a stroke of his machete and five minutes' selfish haggling; he had in addition the joy of contemptuously calling his stealer "Oringo."

The term "Oringo" goes back to a time when a few tall blond Scots served Chile in the War of Liberation from Spain. These often sang Bobby Burns's song "Green Grow the Bushes, Oh!" Thus "Green-grow," now "Oringo," came to denote the south-of-the-Rio-Grande peon's concept of mere conscientiousness in contrasting himself with his tall, blond Northern neighbor.

The Mexican peon does not love the Oringo. He does, however, like Anglo-Saxon living standards. His mind, therefore, is pouring over the border in an almost det-